

By Tom Bengtson, Publisher

Lessons from a hero

What an amazing story – Chesley Sullenberger, a 57-year-old pilot for U.S. Airways, lands a crippled jet in the Hudson River on Jan. 15 and all 155 passengers escape. I have become so accustomed to bad news that a story about a hero really makes an impression on me.

Sullenberger implemented three fundamental rules that all pilots learn about handling a crisis. These are rules that I believe are applicable in the business world.

First, fly the plane. Don't get distracted. Don't worry about talking on the radio, fine-tuning your navigation, or securing your cargo. First thing's first: aviate. In other words, focus on the most important thing. This is a good principle for business, especially when conditions grow uncertain. Don't get sidetracked. Execute your core business functions.

Second, use all available resources to their capacity. A pilot needs to be creative in a crisis. Traveling with a passenger? Enlist that person to help you fly. Have that person take the radio, or have that person scan the horizon for traffic. No radio? Then get out your cell phone. GPS not working? Then get out a road map, if that's all you've got. When you're running a business in uncertain times, you have to be creative. Look for resources that you might miss in better times. Maybe there are sources of credit out there that seemed too expensive, or vendors who seemed a mismatch. Give them serious consideration. In tougher times, what you've got and what you want aren't likely to be the same.

And third, don't quit. Fly the plane all the way to a safe landing. Don't let the situation defeat you. It's the same in business. If times are tough, stick it out. Sure, sometimes a situation truly is more than you can handle, but make someone else force you to stop; don't give into a situation by stopping on your own if you don't have to.

Furthermore, Sullenberger demonstrates the importance of both planning and preparation. Sullenberger certainly planned his flight but a few seconds after takeoff, the flightplan was worthless. What saved him was great preparation. His training over decades prepared him to handle this high-pressure test. In business, people typically put a lot of emphasis on planning. But it is preparation that will get you through tough times. Business people prepare for unexpected challenges with on-going care for risk management, decision-making, and professional development when times are good. Nobody plans for a recession, but when it hits only those who were prepared will come out of it unscathed. ❖



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